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Parental attitudes to school- and home-based relationships, sex and health education: evidence from a cross-sectional study in England and Wales

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ABSTRACT

Subsequent to the introduction of compulsory relationships and health education in primary schools and relationships and sex education and health education (RSHE) in secondary schools in England from 2020, this paper examines the attitudes of parents towards school- and home-based RSHE. Using data from a survey of parents ($n = 849$) of children at 37 independent schools in England and Wales, we analysed parental attitudes towards school-parent communication about RSHE, the teaching of RSHE in school, and their own communication with their children about relationships and sex at home, exploring perceived barriers and use of resources. We found significant parental support for school-based RSHE, alongside some concerns, as well as uncertainty and embarrassment as barriers to parent-child communication about relationships and sex at home, indicating the need for schools to strengthen school-parent partnership in this area, and to encourage parents to talk to their children at home in tandem with what is being taught in school.

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Parents; sexuality education; relationships education; home-based; schools

Introduction

In 2020, Relationships Education was made compulsory in all primary schools in England, alongside Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in all secondary schools, and Health Education in all state-funded schools. While the accompanying statutory guidance of 2019 advances the role of schools in providing RSHE to children in England, it also suggests that 'parents and carers are the prime educators for children on many of these matters' (DfE 2019, 4), and highlights the requirement for schools to consult with parents in developing and reviewing their RSE policy. In England, there is little research into parents' feelings about school-based RSE and how schools communicate with them about the subject, and parents' communication with their children about relationships and sex is an under-researched area. Existing international evidence suggests that parents are generally supportive of schools' provision of RSE, and that they want to talk to their children about relationships and sex, but sometimes lack the confidence or knowledge to

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do so (Noorman, den Daas, and de Wit 2022; Mullis et al. 2021). Drawing on survey data gathered from parents of children attending independent (private) schools in England and Wales, this paper examines parents' attitudes towards school- and home-based RSHE, their perceptions of schools' communication with parents about the subject, and the barriers and difficulties they perceive in talking to their children about relationships and sex, in the context of the home-school partnership established in the RSHE guidance.

Parents and school-based RSE in England and Wales: historical context

Further to the Children and Social Work Act 2017, which placed a duty (coming into effect in 2020) on all primary schools to provide relationships education and on all secondary schools to provide relationships and sex education, the publication of England's Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education guidance (DfE 2019) launched a new era in the politics and practice of school-based sex education. Government guidance on the subject had not been updated since New Labour's non-statutory SRE Guidance of 2000, which contained vestiges of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 prohibiting 'promotion' of homosexuality (not repealed in England until 2003) and was not reflective of the modern age, with the single reference to the Internet stating that children should be 'protected from accessing unsuitable materials on the Internet' (DfEE 2000, 8).

Prior to the new English statutory guidance coming into effect in 2020, only state maintained secondary schools (this excluded Academies and Free Schools – which although state-funded are independent from local authorities and do not have to follow the National Curriculum – and private schools¹) were *required* to teach sex and relationships education (which included teaching about reproduction, sexuality and sexual health including safer sex, HIV and other STIs, and schools had to have regard to the 2000 SRE guidance), and provision across the country was patchy. Parents had a right to withdraw their children from any sex and relationships education provided outside of the National Curriculum for Science. Since 2020, parents retain the right to withdraw their child from sex education at primary and secondary school; however, the school must only respect parents' request to withdraw a child up to and until three terms before the child turns 16, at which point young people themselves can opt to receive the sex education which the school must provide. Parents do not have the option to withdraw their children from relationships education or health education. The statutory guidance applies to independent schools as well as to state-maintained schools.

With the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999, responsibility for education was devolved. In Wales from 2022, comprehensive RSE became mandatory for all maintained schools for ages 3–16, with no parental right of withdrawal. The mandatory RSE code, part of the Curriculum for Wales (which independent schools do *not* have to follow), supports schools to design their RSE, and consists of interlinked learning strands (relationships and identity; sexual health and well-being; and empowerment, safety and respect) across the curriculum delivered via a whole school approach. The Welsh code evolved away from an English 'risk management' approach focusing on teen pregnancy and STIs towards a social justice model working from a children's rights perspective; indeed, Wales had already diverged from England in publishing SRE guidance in 2010 (Renold and McGeeney 2017).

The position in England has been reached after several decades of political wrangling over the place of sex education in schools. The concept of parental right to determine the kind of education given to their children was set out in the 1945 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Zimmerman 2015, 148). Historically, as Zimmerman points out, ‘the family – not the classroom – was [seen as] the proper locus of sexual instruction’ (2015, 3). In England, school sex education was only first seriously considered by central government as cases of sexually transmitted infection (then often known as venereal disease) climbed to a peak in 1946 (Hampshire 2005). The 1943 pamphlet *Sex Education in Schools and Youth Organisations* was the first such government publication; the Board of Education ‘made clear that it considered “prior responsibility” for sex education lay with parents’, though it noted that many were failing in this task and that schools could fill the gap (Hampshire 2005, 90–91). Pilcher writes that ‘in the annual report of the Chief Medical Officer to the Ministry of Education for 1956 and 1957 it was noted that sex education was “by general agreement” best given by parents’ (Pilcher 2005, 160). By the late 1970s, however, parental rights ‘had become rather side-lined as attention became more explicitly focused on the rights and interests of children themselves’ (Pilcher 2005, 164).

The 1986 Education Act, under Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, saw a transfer of control over sex education from local education authorities to school governing bodies, introduced the requirement to make a statement of sex education policy and make copies available to parents, and allowed for parents to withdraw children from sex education, although school governors had discretion to accept or reject withdrawal requests from parents. The 1993 Education Act made sex education compulsory in maintained secondary schools, but gave parents the right to withdraw their children from any or all parts of a school’s sex education lessons (other than that taught in National Curriculum Science). The 2000 SRE Guidance issued by the New Labour government set out the notion of schools consulting with parents with regard to school-based sex education and emphasised the importance of schools working in partnership with parents in its planning and delivery.

In the 2019 guidance, the DfE advises that parents are the first teachers of their children and instructs schools to ‘consult parents in developing and reviewing their policy’. This instruction was outlined in more detail in FAQs published on the government website later in 2019:

Effective engagement gives the space and time for parents to input, ask questions, share concerns and for the school to decide the way forward. Schools will listen to parents’ views, and then make a reasonable decision as to how they wish to proceed. When and how content is taught is ultimately a decision for the school, and consultation does not provide a parental veto on curriculum content.

A school’s policies for these subjects must be published online, and must be available to any individual free of charge. Schools should also ensure that, when they engage parents, they provide examples of the resources they plan to use, for example the books they will use in lessons. [www.gov.uk, (2020)]

The Welsh RSE statutory guidance does not use the word ‘consult’. Rather, it instructs that ‘Schools and settings should have clear lines of communication in relation to RSE and should engage with learners, parents, carers and the wider community, offering them the opportunity to engage with learning and teaching in RSE’ (Welsh Government 2022). It also advises schools to share examples of the resources they plan to use with parents and carers.

Parent-child communication about relationships and sex: research from the UK and Ireland

Reviewing 41 European studies into parents' experiences in the sexual education of their children – largely conducted in the UK and Ireland – Noorman, den Daas, and de Wit (2022) found that parents have strong views about being open and honest with their children when talking about sex and relationships, but struggle to realise these. As Noorman et al point out, most parents see schools as important providers of sex and relationship education. The third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, the largest study of sexual health and lifestyles in Britain, conducted in 2010–12 with nearly 4,000 young men and women aged 16–24, found that for both men and women, school was the main and preferred source of information about sexual matters (Tanton et al. 2015). While parents were ranked below friends and sexual partners as the main source of information, they were ranked second after school for young people's preferred source of information. The Sex Education Forum (a charity working to improve young people's access to RSE)'s (2022) Young People's RSE Poll of 1,002 16-and 17-year-olds in England found that while 33% of respondents rated the quality of their RSE from parents/carers as 'good' or 'very good', 12% rated it as 'bad' or 'very bad'. 19% of respondents reported that they had not learned how babies are conceived and born from parents/carers. Renold et al. (2023), in participatory mixed methods research for the NSPCC,² found in a survey of 639 14–17-year-olds across the UK, that 39% of respondents reported that their parents or carers were comfortable talking with them about relationships, sex and sexuality all or most of the time, and 36% felt their parents were rarely or never comfortable in this.

Stone et al. (2017), in the most recent and largest qualitative UK study of parental attitudes towards sexuality education in the home, interviewed 110 parents of children aged 4–7 across London and southern England. Parents in this study split into two groups – those parents who were reactive, and those who were proactive (a smaller group) – in discussing issues of sexuality with their children, with a small minority 'choosing to communicate both fully and openly about a whole range of sexual matters from an early age' (Stone et al. 2017, 598).

Barriers to parent-child communication about relationships and sex

Mullis et al. (2021), in a systematic review of 37 international articles reporting qualitative research about parent-child communication barriers about sexual health, found that embarrassment was the most cited factor among parents as a barrier to initiating conversations about sexual health with their children; they also cited a lack of knowledge and skills, and fear (focusing on the adverse consequences of sex). 'Communal barriers' relating to social aspects of the community and 'cultural barriers' were found to include the notion that children had already received information from elsewhere; religious or cultural ideas of sex as taboo; age and generational differences; and gender (for example, in some cultures it was seen as taboo for men to talk to daughters about sex).

The USA and Australia have provided most of the research in this area, reflecting evidence of the aforementioned barriers. Astle et al. (2022) surveyed 561 US parents of an oldest child between the ages of 6 and 11 through the survey site Prolific to assess their intentions to discuss various sexual topics with their child. Respondents were most likely

to discuss 'the basics' (anatomy, reproduction, consent) with their child and least likely to discuss 'pleasure'. 50% of the sample had already talked to their child about anatomy, while 4% had talked about sexual pleasure. The study found that parents' own feelings of self-efficacy in their ability to discuss topics were a barrier to their intentions, and that being female and having more permissive sexual attitudes were associated with greater intention to discuss most topics. These findings echo those of Morawska et al. (2015), whose study surveyed 557 Australian parents of children aged 3–10 via schools and parenting organisations. Parents in this study reported generally feeling knowledgeable about educating their child about sexuality, although there were topics that they would not be comfortable in discussing with their child, and were less confident about initiating discussions, accessing resources, and providing resources to their child.

Robinson, Smith, and Davies (2017) surveyed 342 parents and conducted 31 interviews and six focus groups with parents of primary-aged children in Australia, finding that most parents believed sexuality education was important and that there should be a collaborative approach between families and schools. However, many parents indicated that they did not address 'difficult' issues with their children due to a lack of knowledge, embarrassment and/or conflict in values.

Against this background, our study aimed to address the gap in the UK literature with regard to contemporary parental attitudes towards relationships and sex education at school and at home, and barriers to this taking place in the home.

Methods

The survey undertaken for this study was designed to examine parental attitudes towards RSHE in the wake of the 2019 guidance. A parent survey used by a RSHE external provider organisation, *It Happens Education*,³ was adapted by the lead author (NR) for research purposes. The survey consisted of 13 questions (eight of which allowed for open-text responses) relating to parents' experiences of and attitudes towards school- and home-based relationships and sex education, and the implementation of the new RSHE guidance. Respondents had to consent to the data being used for research purposes prior to completing the survey, which was anonymous (no personal data was collected). It is therefore not possible to describe or quantify how respondents identified in terms of sex/gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. This is a weakness of the method, but it was anticipated that complete anonymity would enable a larger sample given the sensitive subject matter.

The online survey was administered via email to parents at 37 independent schools across England ($n = 35$) and Wales ($n = 2$); this convenience sample was used for this study because these schools had engaged the services of *It Happens Education* over the period of January to June 2022. The survey was sent out to parents by the schools, and consequently we do not have data on the number of recipients or the response rate (though calculating an average indicates 23 responses per school). The survey received 849 responses across the 37 schools, although not all questions were answered by all respondents. Respondents were parents of children aged 3–18 attending an even split of pre-prep, prep, senior, and all-through⁴ independent schools.

The survey was sent out as preparation for an 'RSHE Parental Consultation session' delivered by the provider (*It Happens Education*) in conjunction with the school RSHE team in order to find out more about parental views and to encourage parents to engage with the

Table 1. Survey questions analysed.

In one sentence, describe how you feel about RSHE. (open question)
Do you think that RSHE should be primarily the job of parents or carers/school/both? (closed question)
How easy do you find it to talk to your child/ren about relationships and sex? (very easy/moderately easy/not easy/very difficult; closed question)
What are the barriers (if any) to you feeling able to talk to your children about relationships and sex? (open question)
Have you used any books or websites to help you with educating your child/ren about RSHE? (Y/N; closed question)
Please state what books or websites you have used. (open question)
Does your child/ren's school consult with you or inform you about the RSHE curriculum and teaching that your child will receive? (Y/N; closed question)
Please give an example of how this was done. (open question)
In your opinion, how could communication from your child/ren's school to parents about RSHE teaching be improved? (open question)
Are you familiar with the 2019 DfE statutory guidance for schools? (Y/N; closed question)
Is there anything in this guidance that concerns or worries you? (Y/N; closed question) If yes, please explain. (open question)
Is there any topic you would particularly like support with or find difficult to address? (Y/N; closed question)
Please state what topic you would like support with. (open question)

guidance, school policy and subject matter beforehand. Hence, the data were gathered with the aim of reporting on parental perceptions and needs prior to workshops given by the provider.⁵

While we describe the data briefly in quantitative terms (closed questions are analysed using percentages), the main aim of the survey was to gather qualitative data. These data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019). This reflexive approach acknowledges that the researcher makes active choices in production of meaning and interpretation; relevant here is the fact that the authors are supporters of high-quality comprehensive school- and home-based RSHE. The data from the open questions were coded by the authors in order to generate key themes. For example, with the first question, asking participants to describe how they felt about RSHE, responses were coded into 'positive/neutral' and 'concerned' according to adjectives used (see Table 1 for the survey questions analysed).

The study was approved by the University of Westminster College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Ethics Committee (Reference: ETH2122–0281).

Findings

Parents' general attitudes towards school-based Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE)

Parents were asked how in general they felt about school-based RSHE. 80% of parents responded in positive or neutral terms (for example, terms coded as neutral included responses such as 'interested' or 'curious'). The most frequent adjective used to describe RSHE was 'important' (and even most of the parents who had concerns also felt it was important). These positive respondents also used adjectives such as 'vital', 'crucial' and

'essential' to describe how they felt about it, and many comments acknowledged the dual role of parents and school:

Great if it can be taught at home and at school. Children sometimes listen more to teachers than to parents.

Essential that the boys get a factual and balanced education from someone other than their parents, to complement various conversations that may occur at home.

I think it's incredibly important to talk about it early (to the level of the child) to normalise relationships and sex, so it isn't something frightening.

RSHE is vitally important; the responses of Everyone's Invited⁶ reveal how much work we have to do to encourage our children to form relationships that are healthy and happy.

20% of respondents were concerned in some way or other (for example, they felt negatively or anxious about RSHE), or qualified their use of the word 'important', adding, for example, 'if done at the appropriate age and sensitively'. Many of these parents used words such as 'nervous', 'anxious', 'concerned', 'a minefield', 'complicated', 'uncomfortable', 'cautious' and 'confused' to describe how they felt about it. These concerns appeared to relate largely to feeling unsure about, or being critical of, what would be taught to their children in school. A subset (8%) of these parents expressed critical responses or concerns, which related to three areas: the first was that children are being given this education at school at too young an age:

It needs to be open and honest, but not before children stop believing in Santa.

Surprised about how early it is being taught to children, who are for the most part unaware of such things and have no reasons to be aware of them at such a tender age. Kids should be allowed to be kids!

Our daughter ... was upset to recently find out about rape through a [...] lesson, which we didn't know was happening. Generally, this is an important topic, but at 11 she was a bit shocked.

The second concern related specifically to the content of what is taught in school (and in some cases *how* it is taught):

Some sort of RSHE is a good thing, but I am concerned about what is being taught, particularly in relation to LGBTQIA+ issues, especially the areas which are highly contentious or just plain wrong: I would be much happier if parents had the option to review the lessons first and have the option to withdraw their children, should they choose to do so.

Necessary but too focused on minority experiences.

An important part of my child's education but concerned that parents' personal/religious values are disregarded.

Welcome as long as it is age appropriate and not pushing an agenda.

I feel that morals have sadly taken a back seat.

Some of these concerns appeared to relate to a fear of a presumed LGBTQ+ 'agenda', echoing past prohibitions on 'promoting' homosexuality, and to potential tussles over

parental ability to determine their children's relationships and sex education and ensure it reflects their values.

The third critical concern related to the belief that the provision of relationships and sex education is solely parents' responsibility. While only six parents answered how they felt about RSHE by saying it was parents' job, when respondents were asked to choose between whether they thought RSHE was *primarily* the responsibility of parents, schools, or both parents and schools, 21% answered 'parents', 2% answered 'schools', and 77% answered 'both'.

Many parents (who did not articulate strongly positive or negative/anxious feelings about school-based RSHE) felt unsure how to approach discussion of relationships and sex with their children and so were pleased to receive information/help from the school both for themselves and their child:

A topic that should be discussed more openly, but also scared as I don't know what content to discuss with my daughter at what stage.

My eldest is 9 and was asking me about sex last week. No idea how to address the topic in a sensitive and appropriate way, also what age he is likely to start having his own sexual experiences, so any guidance like this is hugely welcome!

Very insecure in how to discuss with my children.

Bit clueless about how to approach this at home.

Appreciate guidance on how to approach.

Barriers to parents feeling able to talk to their children about relationships and sex

Parents were asked how easy they felt it was to talk to their children about relationships and sex. 34% answered 'very easy', 48% answered 'moderately easy', 16% answered 'not easy' and 2% answered 'very difficult'. When asked the open question 'what are the barriers (if any) to you feeling able to talk to your children about relationships and sex?', from 767 responses, 18% said there were no barriers. Of those who felt there were barriers, the most frequent response was their child/ren's embarrassment and/or reluctance to talk about it, or embarrassment on the part of both them and their child/ren, while a handful specified that it was their own embarrassment that was the barrier:

Not wanting to embarrass them or make them feel uncomfortable.

Their embarrassment over the idea that you still have sex!

Anticipated awkwardness. I envision our son squirming, then crying 'hashtag awkward' and fleeing the room.

They laugh and look horrified.

The next most common barrier that parents identified was being unsure about how to talk to their children about relationships and sex and/or what the right time was or what was age-appropriate:

Giving the appropriate information and advice at the right time.

I am not sure how to start the conversation.

Deciding how much detail to give.

Timing – children develop in this space at different speeds ... the minute they have a smartphone it's too late to take the initiative.

Other barriers mentioned included the 'generation gap', the influence of social media, and difficulty with cross-sex discussion:

I find it easier to talk to my daughter than my son about this.

I am a 74-year-old father. She is a 12-year-old girl.

Children feeling like I belong to a different century.

Materials used by parents, and topics they would welcome support with

When parents were asked if they had used any books or websites to help with educating their children at home about relationships and sex, 41% answered yes, and 59% answered no. When asked which specific books or sites they had used, 278 parents responded. The most commonly used resources were the British-based Usborne books for girls and boys *What's Happening to Me?* (Meredith 2006; Frith 2006). Another commonly used resource was the US book *Let's Talk about Sex* (Harris and Emberley 2021). The other responses were diverse; they included the British book *Brilliant Questions about Growing Up* (Forbes-Robertson and Fryer 2020), and books by the British journalist and writer Caitlin Moran, the US academic Anne Fausto-Sterling, and the Australian parenting author Steve Biddulph, as well as the Netflix show *Sex Education*. Surprisingly, only 34 parents specifically mentioned using websites. These included BBC, NHS and NSPCC, and two parents mentioned using a Christian website *Lovewise* – so, also surprisingly, not any dedicated sex education websites.

When parents were asked whether there was any topic they would particularly like support with or find hard to address, 25% ($n = 150$) responded yes, and 75% ($n = 449$) no. When those answering yes were asked to state what they would like support with, of 142 responses, 48 parents (34%) were concerned about discussing pornography (this was the most common response):

How to support boys with understanding porn is not real.

Pornography because I don't understand the attraction.

Parents and schools really need to work on pornography. It is pernicious and the government is doing nothing to help.

Pornography and how some can be healthy and some not.

Other issues parents wanted support with included consent, sexual pleasure, homosexuality and transgender issues, and 'online stuff'/social media.

Schools' communication with parents about the content of RSHE

83% of parents answered yes to the question of whether their child's school consults with or informs them about RSHE curriculum and teaching, while 18% said no. When asked to give examples of how this consultation/information was done/given, most parents said it was conducted by email and/or online session (including a parent webinar and the survey via which this data was collected) about the topics covered and any questions they had.

Parents were asked how this communication from school to parents could be improved. Around half (48%) were entirely happy with it or had not yet formed an opinion. The majority of those who thought there could be improvement wanted more detail, in advance, of exactly what was going to be taught (it should be noted that the data was gathered before *It Happens Education's* session with parents):

I would like to be provided with specific materials that are going to be covered ... this would allow me to continue the dialogue at home ...

The school should provide a lesson breakdown for parents to comment on beforehand.

The full curriculum should be shared with parents.

Finally, parents were asked if they were familiar with the 2019 DfE RSHE guidance (the Welsh RSE code had not been published at the point of data collection). Of 805 responses, 23% answered yes, while 77% answered no. When asked if there was anything in the guidance that concerned them, of 675 responses, 14% said yes, while 87% said no. When asked to explain what concerned them, parents commented on teaching about LGBTQ identities (too much emphasis on this, and/or disagreeing with teaching about it), some topics being taught too early, and on too much time being devoted to RSE in school at the expense of other subjects:

The political environment is so concerned with being politically correct and inclusive that they are pushing ideas onto children who are too young to understand the whole complexity of the subject and they are being exposed to things they never even contemplated before to the point that the children think they can pick and choose their sexuality and sexual preferences as if they were flavours of ice cream! There are subjects that should be banned for certain ages.

The guidance on LGBT is vague. I am against it being positively promoted (as in the media) but believe it should be treated with tolerance.

This is a boys' school. Don't tell them they can become girls or any of that nonsense.

I think it is too broad and would rather children were taught more English and Maths.

Like anything I will read information from government, but we will make up our own minds and judgement based on our own research and discussion.

If it's all agreed that parents and carers should be the primary source of information, why [are they] making this compulsory?

Discussion

Parents in this study were generally very supportive and appreciative of school-based RSHE, with it being seen as particularly valuable in the current climate: sexual harassment and sexual violence continue to be prevalent in many schools (House of Commons 2023; Ofsted 2021). A minority of parents were anxious and/or concerned about RSHE, with a few articulating strong concerns relating to the age-appropriateness of some content, the curriculum being too focused on ‘minority experiences’, and not taking parents’ values into consideration. Since the data for this research were gathered, and further to a report from the New Social Covenant (2023) which claims that ‘experimental and unsafe RSE is occurring’ in schools, the government announced it would bring forward a planned Department for Education review of the RSHE guidance. This review was welcomed by the Sex Education Forum, which points out that only 40% of young people rate their lessons as ‘good’ or ‘very good’ Sex Education Forum (2023b). These claims about age-inappropriate RSE underscore the importance of encouraging parental engagement in school- and home-based RSE, and of making clear that, as stated by the Sex Education Forum (2023a), evidence shows that comprehensive RSE safeguards children and young people, and addresses the everyday realities that young people navigate daily both online and offline.

While the majority of parents felt it was very or moderately easy to talk to their children at home about relationships and sex, a majority also felt there were barriers to this, these largely being around embarrassment (their own and their children’s), and uncertainty about how and when to do it. When asked about any particular topics they would like support with, fewer parents than might be expected gave examples of topics; this could be due to it not being their lack of knowledge that was a barrier, but rather a lack of confidence in how to approach things, or a lack of awareness of relevant topics, or a combination of all these. In terms of the resources parents *had* used, perhaps the very low reported frequency of using websites (as compared to books) on sex education reflects a lack of awareness of the existence of plentiful good quality internet resources. For example, Brook and the NSPCC⁷ websites host resources to help parents talk to their children about relationships and sex. Many parents wanted more detail from the school as to the content of school-based RSE. We discuss the implications of these findings below.

School-parent communication and partnership

The Sex Education Forum’s most recent Young People’s Poll found that 42% of respondents disagreed with the statement ‘my school gave my parents/carers enough information about what we were learning in Relationships and Sex Education lessons’ (Sex Education Forum 2023b). While our findings also point to the need to strengthen school-parent communication and partnership with respect to RSE, in the experience of *It Happens Education* and other professional practitioners (personal communications), schools’ perception is often that they *do* provide advance curriculum detail, that parental engagement and take up with this is low, and that online or in-person parent sessions are also poorly attended. While there are obvious difficulties for schools in consulting parents about RSE while maintaining control over decisions about what is and when it is taught, young people stand to benefit when parents are encouraged to take up an active partnership with schools. As Emmerson (2013) has pointed out, even when there are

differences between what is taught at school and at home, young people are enabled to develop their own understandings and views. Vincent (2022), discussing the 2019 protests by mainly Muslim parents and local community against the use of LGBTQ+- friendly story books in a primary school in Birmingham, has outlined the benefits of developing school-parent relationships in this area. Research also suggests that parental perception of ‘age-appropriateness’ may not align with the realities of young people’s lives. Parents, for example, tend to underestimate their children’s engagement with pornography (Wright et al. 2022; Davis et al. 2021).

Schools therefore can play an important role in helping parents to be aware of the issues facing children and young people and in providing them with context for school RSE curricula. Schools’ role here is twofold: suggested ways to engage effectively with parents include establishing parent understandings and views about RSE via mechanisms such as parent surveys, as well as providing information about what will be taught and advice for parents about how to talk to young people about relationships and sex at home (PSHE Association 2019). Schools’ comprehensive communication with parents about RSE throughout primary and secondary education is key, including its rationale in terms of safeguarding and health outcomes (PSHE Association 2019).

The ‘good’ neoliberal parent and sex education

Explicit policy positioning of parents as their children’s first educators for relationships and sex is perhaps not borne out in reality. In this study, there was a subset of parents who responded to the survey (and presumably also many who did not) who were unsure as to how and when to go about talking about relationships and sex with their child and/or found it difficult. As noted in the literature, most parents perceive schools as important providers of RSE, and many young people do not rate the quality of RSE provided by their parents very highly. There is perhaps a mismatch between parents feeling it is easy or moderately easy (82% in this study) to talk to their children about relationships and sex, and young people reporting their parents being comfortable with it (39% in the NSPCC study cited above). The premise informing the guidance, as well as providing a nod towards parental control over sex education, arguably constructs parents as ‘good’ neoliberals who (should) educate their children from birth, are consistently involved in the child’s school education, and are willing and able to work in partnership with the school.

Under this intensive parenting model, then, the ‘good’ parent will familiarise themselves with the RSE guidance, attend information sessions on RSE provided by the school, and in this context, engage with a parental survey in preparation for such a session. There can be seen here a professionalisation of parenting that is reflective of the ‘greater expectation on parents to be responsible for all aspects of their child’s development’ (Crozier 2019, 323). Relatedly, the contemporary culture of parenting in relation to children’s online behaviour is characterised by intensive parenting norms, with responsible parenting associated with some degree of monitoring and restricting children’s online activity (Wall 2021). Zhang and Livingstone (2019), in a digital parenting study based on a nationally representative survey of 2,032 UK parents of children aged 0–17, found that ‘parents of higher SES and education background, single parents, and parents of children with SEN report more online harms for their children, and also do more

parental mediation, such as suggesting ways in which their children can use the internet safely, discussing their online activities, and using parental control or apps to block children's access to certain types of websites' (2).

Even among the highly engaged (and presumably mostly high SES) respondents to this survey, though, there were parents who reported that they struggled to communicate with their children about relationships and sex. As reported in the findings, 77% of survey respondents felt that RSE was primarily the responsibility of both parents and schools, indicating a strong desire for school involvement.

Barriers to parent-child communication about relationships and sex

The barriers we report here to parent-child communication in the home are reflective of much existing literature. The barrier of embarrassment, which was most frequently brought up by our respondents when asked about communication with their children about relationships and sex, is reflective of the findings of Mullis et al. (2021) (see previous discussion). Elliott (2010), in a study of US parents of teenagers, found that mothers experienced their teenagers as active partners in relation to whether or not communication about relationships and sex occurs in the home (for example, mothers might wait for cues from the child as to when to discuss the topic). Mothers perceived their children (especially sons, as part of a 'natural' masculinity) as resistant to talking about sex and viewed this as part of 'normal' adolescent development (i.e. the separation from parents). Mothers in Elliott's study also routinely mentioned their own embarrassment and awkwardness around the topic, as well as an ambivalence about how much and what to say. Perhaps also there is an element of projection of parental anxieties and embarrassment onto children here; as Dyer (2019) suggests, an anxious adult transference of complex relationships to their own childhoods onto debates about an 'appropriate' sex education for children may be at play. Whilst our study was not able to report on differences between mothers and fathers in terms of the roles played in parent-child communication, it is important to note that previous research has highlighted the need to encourage father-son communication (Tanton et al. 2015), though interestingly, SEF (2023b) found that boys rated their school RSE more highly than girls.

Reflexive analysis

Using a reflexive thematic analytic approach to examine the data meant paying attention to the active choices we made in framing and presenting the analysis. While we have framed our analysis by quantitative answers to each survey question, our argument is equally influenced by our commitment to both school- and home-based RSHE. We as researchers in this field take an active stance in working to help schools to deliver high quality comprehensive relationships and sex education for all children and young people, and to communicate effectively with all parents about it. Underlying this position is UNESCO's (2018) International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, which suggests that providing all young people with access to comprehensive relationships and sex education respects the right of every individual to education and to the highest attainable standard of health and well-being. In terms of school-parent partnership, as this guidance states, 'The chances of personal growth for children and young people are likely to be

much better if teachers and parents support each other in implementing a guided and structured teaching/learning process' (88). As we have argued, schools that provide high quality RSHE in collaboration with parents will relieve parents of the burden that having to be their child's sole educator in this area may entail and will 'catch' those young people whose parents do not talk to them about relationships and sex or who do not wish to talk to their parents about it. Young people are not always willing to talk to their parents about relationships and sex, and parents may not know where and when to start. As Renold et al. (2023) found, young people report that talking to family can be helpful, but can also be awkward and intrusive, and in some cases, the gulf between their parents' experiences and their own feels too wide to bridge. Parents in turn, even with the best of intentions, may not have the time to engage with school webinars on the RSHE curriculum or to monitor their child's social media use and to discuss sexual material and develop a critical media literacy in their children.

Conclusions

This study echoes much previous research in this area in terms of wide parental support for school-based RSHE, and in particular the embarrassment that many parents experience at home in their (attempts at) communication with their children about relationships and sex. It outlines the types of resources parents are using at home, issues they would like more support with (pornography, consent, sexual pleasure, online issues), their feelings about schools' communication with parents about RSHE, as well as pointing to a minority of parents demonstrating concerns about age-appropriate sex education, and a perceived LGBTQ 'agenda' in English/Welsh school-based RSHE.

While 34% of parents responding to the survey felt it was 'very easy' to talk to their children about relationships and sex, and indeed some were using high quality resources to help them engage with their children, most parents found it less than 'very easy', with embarrassment and feeling unsure of what to say and when to say it being the major barriers. Only 18% of parents in this study felt there were no barriers to talking to their children about relationships and sex. The issue most parents felt concerned about was pornography, which is reflective of the broader literature (see Davis et al. 2021; Zurcher 2017). The results of our study suggest that schools can strengthen their partnership with parents in an attempt to encourage better links between school and home education and further support parent-child discussion about relationships and sex.

Parents in this study were mostly very happy with school-based RSHE and were very keen to engage with the school and to support their children in relation to relationships and sex education. Many parents wanted more detailed communication and outline of specific RSHE curriculum materials. This underlines the importance of schools effectively communicating to parents the context of the whole curriculum, and perhaps also of communicating research evidence (Renold et al. 2023) demonstrating that young people would like the RSE curriculum to be more comprehensive and more closely connected to their own lives.

As outlined earlier, only a small number of parents in each of the 37 schools responded to the survey, so it is difficult to claim any kind of representativeness for the study. Our findings are also reflective of the socio-economic context of the elite schooling these parents were providing for their children (although there are a range of schools in the

study in terms of level of fees and bursaries). It should also be noted that the private school-parent 'business-client' relationship makes teachers more accountable to parents (Brady and Wilson 2022).

Finally, we should draw attention to the fact that RSHE is compulsory in secondary schools only up to the age of 16 and, as recently noted by the House of Commons' Women and Equalities Committee, RSHE should be extended to young people in post-16 educational settings (House of Commons 2023). With the median age of first sex in Britain being 17 (YouGov 2023), this is especially pertinent. Relatedly, Palmer et al. (2019) found that young women who had discussed sexual matters with their parents, and those who reported school to be their main source from which they learnt about sexual matters, were more likely to have been [categorised as] sexually competent at first sex (134), underscoring the importance of parent-school partnership working.

Notes

1. While there was, prior to 2020, no requirement for sex education to be provided in private schools, the Independent School Standards required some form of PSHE (personal, social, health and economic education) to be offered.
2. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.
3. *It Happens Education* is a team of specialists delivering RSHE sessions in schools and supporting schools' existing provision (<https://ithappens.education/>)
4. Pre-prep and prep schools are private schools preparing pupils aged 4 to 13 for entry to private secondary (senior) schools; all-through schools are for pupils aged 3–18.
5. The data collected encompasses parents' views about the entirety of schools' RSHE provision. This entirety is not provided by *It Happens Education*, and so data analysed in what follows is not reflective of that organisation. *It Happens Education* works with schools to enhance their RSHE teaching by bringing, parent and student voice. The organisation's involvement with schools varies. In some cases, it provides a one-off parent session which supports the school's statutory consultation, with resources on display. In other cases, staff from *It Happens Education* go on to provide student workshops, so parent sessions will cover the content of these workshops.
6. www.everyonesinvited.uk is an online campaign aiming to expose and eradicate rape culture; its website, founded in June 2020, holds thousands of testimonies of incidents of sexual harassment.
7. Brook is a sexual health and wellbeing charity for young people, and the NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) is the UK's leading children's charity specialising in child protection.

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